CEASA

By Aelius Blythe

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“Hey, fag.”

Gorge smiled at the greeting and answered it by dipping his head, shyly tucking his hair back. A few pink strands fell back in front of his eyes, and he tucked them behind his ear again.

“Hey,” he said.

The burly guy who’d hurled the greeting squinted down, snorted and moved on past. Gorge snorted back and paced away in the opposite direction, down the sidewalk, down to the corner, then twirled slowly and walked back. The burly guy shook his head and snorted as they passed each other again and Gorge smiled and waved. The burly guy didn’t wave. His hands full of a cardboard sign.

Hands off my fuel

Gorge walked to the other corner, turned and came back. Then he repeated the process again. Then again. Then again. And he paced, and he paced, and he paced. Around him a dozen or so people were doing the same thing.

Across the street, the tall doors remained closed.

Pink hair? Pink hair???

Wright ran a hand over his own bald head and drummed his fingers against the shiny, waxed skin there. The other hand clicked anxiously against the shiny, polished desk in front of him. His nails were too long, he’d have to clip those again. *Again.* What the hell was it that people on this stupid planet had against long nails anyway?

“Hands off! Hands off!”

The chants broke through the halls of Congress, making a dim and distorted whisper through the thick walls. The people around him – preoccupied and practically deaf humans – probably couldn’t even hear the voices from far out on the street. but Wright could hear well enough to recognize a vaguely familiar voice.

Crazy runaways… Fucking pink? Why pink? Runaways…

They always did tend to end up in weird crowds.

Wright's fingers drummed harder against his skull and against the table until one of the black-suited, grey-haired men in front of him turned around and gave him a narrow-eyed, grey-haired look of disgust through a pair of wire-rimmed glasses.

Or not…

Wright's fingers stilled, the glaring man in front of him turned around, a buzzing voice began to drone front of the room, echoing around the cavernous chamber, and Wright began to think the pink haired youth outside wasn't really the one in the wrong crowd.

His fingers began to absently drum again as the droning voice continued.

"… not the question of what *world* do we want to create, or how do we want to protect the *planet*. We answer the question what kind of *home* do we want to create for our children, and how do we want to protect *ourselves*…"

And the voice droned on. And on. And on. And on.

"…a concerted effort to scrub our air of the poison…"

Finally, the tall doors opened.

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Black suits poured out. Men and women, grey-haired and black-suited and smiling, stepped down the steps of Congress to a welcoming party of cameras and questions being shouted all together. Even to Gorge, it sounded like gibberish. Cringing from the deafening clamor, he squinted into the mess of suits.

"Hey!"

He'd spotted, amidst the grey hair, a head without any hair at all.

"Hey!"

Across the street, the bald man grimaced and turned deliberately away. Beside Gorge, the burly guy with the sign spat on the ground.

"Hands off! Hands off!" the protesters shouted.

Gorge moved forward.

"Wright! Hey! Hey–*ow*."

He looked down at something hard that had clobbered him in the stomach. It was the blue arm of a policeman. He looked up at the face connected to the arm; it was a silent, glaring face. "Wright!" he yelled over the policeman's shoulder. "Hey! Hey, Wright! *Ow–goddammit!*" The sidewalk scraped his hands as he found himself on his ass.

The policeman was standing over him. "Behind the line, buddy," he said.

Gorge pushed himself to his feet. The blue-sleeved arm shoved at him again and he backpedaled a few steps.

Then there was another hand on him. A heavy hand on his shoulder.

He turned around. The burly guy who'd greeted him pulled him back away from the cop. The cardboard sign lay abandoned on the sidewalk. The burly guy stepped up to the policeman, towering a head shoulders above him. Then he shoved the shield-shaped badge pinned on the blue chest, shoved hard.

A moment later, a billy club was swinging. Gorge ducked under the fray.

"Wright! Wright!"

Wright flinched at the volume of the voice without the thick walls buffering it. "No need to yell," he whispered.

Fifty feet away the pink-haired runaway looked apologetic. "Sorry," he whispered back, stepping around dueling cops and protesters.

Wright kept walking past the cameras and the journalists pounding him with questions, even though they didn't know who he was.

"Go away," he whispered to the pink-haired youth whose footsteps he could hear following him. He had no idea what to call the runaway, he could be going by anything here.

"Hey, Wright? It's *Gorge*." He stressed the name. "Remember me?"

It was the standard greeting. *It's __. Remember me?* It meant, *This is my name on this planet. Call me this.* Wright turned around.

"What's with your hair?" he asked.

"This is how they look. On Earth," explained Gorge. "I did my research. I saw pictures in the Guide. Sometimes it's blue, sometimes it's–"

"Wrong side, dumbass."

"What?"

Wright gritted his teeth and tried, almost successfully, not to roll his eyes. “Wrong side. Do you see anyone with blue hair over there?” He gestured to the now handcuffed protesters across the street.

“Um–”

“No you don’t. Because it’s the fucking hippies who do shit like that. The environmentalists. The *weirdos*. The ones who *want* to drain the world of our fuel.” Wright explained.

“Oh…”

“Research. *Pfft,*” he snorted. “And get some new fucking pants, too.”

“What?” Gorge looked down at the threads of his jeans dragging on the ground and at the knees that exposed the bare skin underneath. “No–”

“Wrong side,” said Wright again.

“Damn. I spent the whole morning on these.”

Wright turned around. He didn’t have time for a dumb runaway. “Wait, where are you going?” the youth asked.

“Where do you think?”

“Um…. L.A.?” said Gorge, probably naming the dirtiest city he’d seen from above. *Research. Right.* Wright just shot a withering look over his shoulder and kept walking.

“Where?” Gorge prodded.

“I’m going to Beijing. China. Other side of the planet.”

“Oh.” Understanding dawned on the kid’s face. “How are you going to get there?”

“Plane.”

“Can I–”

“No.”

“Please? You won’t even know I’m there. I got–” he dug around in his pockets for a second, then opened the denim satchel that was slung over one shoulder. He shifted around a couple pink-stained combs and some bags with what looked like spices. Finally, he pulled out a card. “I got credit. Traded for it before we crashed. Come on, let me come with you.”

Wright looked over at him. *Crashed? Of course. That’s how you got here.*

The youth was bouncing around beside him, keeping up. He felt a little sorry for the dumb kid. Just a little. He was a just a runaway – a traveler, he'd call himself. Wright had seen him occasionally elsewhere in the universe – it wasn't uncommon to run into young travelers here and there. It was a big galaxy, but not that big. But Wright had never befriended any of the runaw– travelers. In fact, he was pretty sure this was the first time he'd talked to one. Didn't have time for their shenanigans. But folks from home could always recognize each other.

He shook his head. "Fine," he said.

The pink-haired runaway beamed. "Thanks, I–"

"And by the way," Wright cut him off, "your name is *George*." He emphasized the *J* soundat the beginning. "George."

"What? No… I saw it in the Guide, I'm pretty sure it's–" "Learn to read if you're going to pick up a book. It's *George*."

The glossy leaflet lay flat on the tray table. Gorge couldn't help reading over Wright's shoulder.

CEASA: Carbon Emissions Active Solutions Act

"How'd the meeting go?" he asked and thought he saw Wright's eyes role at the interruption. "How do you think? Not good."

"Well there's a lot of people helping us out. And I thought they were pretty convincing," he said, thinking of the burly guy with the sign. "Mhmm."

Gorge looked away from the bald man and out the window. The captain had said they were almost there. Flight was so slow here! He wished his own ship hadn't run out of fuel, otherwise he could have made the trip in about five minutes. Of course, if his own ship hadn't run out of fuel, he wouldn't have to make the trip at all… He gazed out the window, and jiggled his foot, antsy to get off this uncomfortable and primitive contraption. He leaned closer to the window, pressing his forehead against the glass, and squinted. But he still couldn't see the ground through the thick white clouds that obscured the world.

Then the wheels hit the runway.

He jerked back in surprise.

Woah.

White clouds still veiled the windows, but the wheels were definitely rolling across the ground. Gorge's teeth chattered at the rough ride. Close by, but barely visible, the swooping roof of a building poked through the "clouds." But Gorge had to squint hard to see anything outside the window. Tendrils of white air, thick like they had just been breathed out of a dragon's mouth, creeped by.

Woah.

He smiled at the world outside the window, a world thick with fuel.

But will it be enough?

He felt his smile tense, just a little, and worry creep back into his gut. The CEASA brigade had been working all over the world, and thick as the blanket of carbon emissions was now, it had begun to thin.

After an hour of fumbling through numerous security checkpoints with their standard-issue adaptive IDs , they were out. Gorge took a deep breath.

Mmmm.

The carbon was thick in the air.

“You on your own, okay, kid?”

Wright’s irritated voice brought Gorge out of his own thoughts. He considered protesting for a moment. He watched Wright shifting papers around in his briefcase. A long thin strip of light deep in the back of the case, right next to the hinges shone bright red – so bright that it bathed the white papers in its bloody light. A moment later, Wright swiped the papers back over the light and the briefcase snapped shut. That guy had enough problems for the moment.

So Gorge just said, “Ok” and turned and took a few tentative steps away from the airport, no clear plan in mind.

“Wait.”

Gorge turned around. “What?” “Here.” Wright held out some coins.

“What’s this?” asked Gorge as he took them.

“Take the subway – the train – that way,” he said and pointed back into the airport through a window to a sign that said SUBWAY. “Take that into the city. You’ll get a better charge there.”

“Thanks.”

An hour later, Gorge was at the center of the city beaming around at the dirty streets and smoggy air. He opened his mouth wide and inhaled the smog – he could practically lick the particles out of the air. He sat down and opened the denim satchel that had started to dig into his shoulder.

He pulled a poodle out of the bag.

He held the dog in the crook of one arm and patted it on the head as it wriggled mechanically. Its mouth opened and a very realistic looking tongue stuck out. Way back on the tongue a line of light glowed. It was completely red.

Woah, doggie.

He patted the poodle's head again and set the dog in his lap where it panted and wagged its tail happily. He ran his hand along the fluffy white back, petting it. It felt bizarre to be petting his ship's battery, but otherwise people might get suspicious. And he needed to sit here for a while without being bothered. He needed the battery to charge.

The carbon emissions monitor was dangerously low, and without a big enough kick, he might never get off this planet.

A few hours later, it was dark. He patted the poodle's head yet again. It opened its mouth, and again the light glowed at the back of its tongue. It was about 75% green.

Damnit.

After creeping up from empty, the bar of light hadn't moved a bit in the last hour.

Damn CEASA lobbyists!

He sighed, patted the battery's head again. The green and red lights disappeared and he stuck the thing back in his bag.

That'll have to be enough.

He got up from the bench and watched a tiny electric car zip around the corner. Gorge stuck out his fist and extended the middle finger in the traditional symbol of displeasure he'd read about in the Guide. The people in the car laughed.

Then he made his way back in to the airport, took out the card he'd traded for just in time – the card that let him get anywhere – and made his way back to the other side of the planet on an infuriatingly slow flight.

"Went!" He moved some tree branches away from the worn metal door and banged on it. "Went!"

"Yeah, yeah," a voice came from the other side of the airlock. "Coming!"

A moment later, a shadow appeared through the door's window and a very young man with a very scraggly beard opened the door. One hand was holding a bag of chips, the other was picking at a bandage just above his elbow – a souvenir from their plunge to this planet.

"How's the arm?" asked Gorge.

The scraggly-bearded guy just grunted and slammed the door after Gorge.

Gorge walked through the currently useless airlock. On the other side, he kicked aside the glossy bags and crumpled napkins that littered the floor. He shivered in the powerless spacecraft which was now dark and cold.

“Got the battery?” asked Went.

“Yeah,” he said and dug the poodle once more out of his shoulder bag. “Let’s get the hell off this planet.”

He patted the dog on the head and it opened its mouth. Gorge detached the tongue and stuck it into its empty slot on the ship’s console.

A few moments passed. Gorge jiggled the tongue. The ship stayed quiet. “*Damnit.*”

“What?”

“It’s too late. It’s not enough of a charge.” “So…”

“Yeah. We’re stuck.”